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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SKOPJE 000629

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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: PRIME MINISTER ON WAY AHEAD FOR NATO
CANDIDACY

REF: SKOPJE 615

Classified By: AMBASSADOR MILOVANOVIC, REASONS 1.4(b) & (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) During a July 31 tete-a-tete lunch, PM Gruevski outlined what he considers to be the remaining tasks for Macedonia to make its case for NATO membership: implement the May 29 VMRO-DUI agreement, fully constitute the State Judicial Council, and pass a liberal religious freedom law. He also said he wanted to lower the profile of his ongoing public confrontations with President Crvenkovski, expressed concerns about the activities of a group of alleged ethnic Albanian criminals in northwestern Macedonia, and discussed his proposal to give guaranteed seats in the parliament to smaller ethnic minorities.

¶2. (C) I recommended that Gruevski continue to focus on the priorities he outlined, but not to neglect implementation of the Framework Agreement or efforts to combat corruption. I said it was important to avoid ad hominem attacks on Crvenkovski, and -- if and when legitimate situations arose -- to demonstrate effective police control over all regions of Macedonia, in line with international policing standards. I also urged him to avoid using the offer of extra seats to the smaller ethnic minorities as a tactic for bypassing discussions with the opposition, especially on legislation requiring a Badinter (qualified majority) vote. End summary.

FOCUSING ON REMAINING NATO CANDIDACY TASKS

¶3. (C) Prime Minister Gruevski told me July 31 he was focusing on the "few remaining tasks" to be accomplished to strengthen Macedonia's NATO candidacy. He said the political dialogue process with the opposition would continue, that he hoped to work out the composition of a fully-functioning State Judicial Council as part of judicial reform implementation, and that he was aiming to see a more liberal religious freedom law passed before the end of the year.

¶4. (SBU) I told Gruevski that he was focusing on the right priorities, but that he also needed to ensure continued implementation of the Framework Agreement, especially phase II of decentralization. There also was much more to be done to combat corruption, including additional prosecutions of "big fish" cases (ref A) and full implementation of the State Anti-corruption Commission's action plan. (NOTE: To which USAID has made important contributions.) I urged him to

ensure his cabinet understood he was fully committed to backing his new anti-corruption adviser, a former senior Romanian government official with a proven track record in combating corruption. I also advised Gruevski to take into consideration OSCE ODIHR comments on the draft religious freedom law, and to work toward tightening some of the language that ODIHR had found, in a few instances, to be either too restrictive or too vague. I did confirm OSCE ODIHR's assessment that the new draft overall is good, and needs only a few language fixes.

IMPLEMENTING MAY 29 VMRO-DUI AGREEMENT

15. (SBU) Gruevski said he was moving ahead on implementation of the May 29 VMRO-DUI agreement. VMRO had submitted language to include 46 agreed laws requiring Badinter (qualified majority) voting in the draft parliamentary rulebook, and would also submit for parliamentary consideration a draft law on the composition of the parliamentary Inter-ethnic Committee (IEC). (NOTE: Gruevski's Chief of Staff informed us August 1 that the draft law has now been shared with DUI, at my request, for their comments before it goes to the parliament for consideration. END NOTE.)

16. (SBU) Gruevski noted that VMRO was ready to reconstitute the IEC, as agreed with DUI, once the Badinter laws were incorporated in the approved rulebook. He added that the working groups on language and on a social package for the victims of the 2001 conflict were meeting regularly, but that his coalition partner, ethnic Albanian DPA, was "getting nervous" about the possibility that DUI might secure agreement on one or more of the issues under working group

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discussion without giving credit to DPA for resolving issues of importance to the ethnic Albanian electorate.

17. (C) I noted that VMRO-DPMNE needs to look not just at its own proposed language law text, but also should review DUI's draft law. I recommended that both parties agree on how to combine and modify their respective texts to achieve a compromise result. I also told Gruevski that, as the senior coalition partner in the government, he could help DPA take at least partial credit for what was achieved in the working groups. I urged him to complete the work on the social package for victims of conflict before the November 2007 visit to Skopje of the US interagency team that would assess Macedonia's NATO candidacy. As this would require no legislative action, I pointed out, Gruevski had the power to solve the issue quickly. I also stressed the importance of ensuring we continued a frank, constructive dialogue on a range of issues, and said I would always strive to be honest with him, even if he sometimes found that honesty uncomfortable.

CURBING ATTACKS ON THE PRESIDENT

18. (C) Responding to our concerns about the negative impact on the domestic political climate of his ongoing public confrontations with President Crvenkovski, Gruevski told me he had decided to stop attacking the President in public. He had, however, given his party leadership and the government spokesman permission to keep up the pressure on the presidency. I told him it was important to refrain from personal attacks on Crvenkovski, and to demonstrate a more statesmanlike approach to governing. Gruevski assured me he could and would work with the President on matters of national importance.

CONTROL OVER MACEDONIAN TERRITORY

19. (C) Gruevski reiterated GOM concerns expressed by his staff in early July over what he described as the activities of some 35 ethnic Albanian criminals, or persons for whom there were outstanding arrest warrants, who recently had

congregated in the northwestern village of Brodec, near the Kosovo border. He said he was concerned about their activities in that area. The Macedonian police wanted to take action against the group, but the government was concerned about the impact of such an operation on the country's NATO candidacy.

¶10. (C) I urged Gruevski to verify the facts in this case and said I would once again seek information from Embassy sources regarding the group's alleged activities. I noted that when we had checked the allegations earlier, in mid-July, we had found nothing to corroborate the reports. We would, however, check again. If it turned out that police action was necessary, I said, it should proceed in a carefully planned, non-partisan operation designed to minimize civilian casualties, and in close coordination with our DOJ and other international police advisers. I stressed the importance of demonstrating that the police could operate effectively, in a manner consistent with international policing standards, if the situation gave rise to the need for enforcement action. That would allow the U.S. to support Macedonia in the event police action led to unfounded domestic or international criticism.

AMENDING ELECTORAL CODE TO BOOST SMALL ETHNIC GROUP REPRESENTATION

¶11. (C) Gruevski said he would propose in September (after the parliament's August recess) amendments to the electoral code that would guarantee 10 new MP seats for the smaller ethnic minorities in the country (Serbs, Turks, Roma, Bosniacs, Vlachs). He would also propose an electoral code amendment that would allow for diaspora communities to vote. He hoped to win opposition SDSM support for the proposal by incorporating their idea of having one "diaspora MP" from each of three regions -- the Americas, Europe, Australia -- elected under the new code. Gruevski also would offer an Agency for Minority Communities to address the concerns of the smaller ethnic groups, and would propose an omnibus "Law for Small Nationalities" to gather existing legislation into a single law.

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¶12. (C) I cautioned Gruevski against turning the minority seats proposal into a tactical maneuver for bypassing the opposition, especially the ethnic Albanian DUI party. If Gruevski hoped to cobble together enough ethnic minority votes to allow him to pass legislation requiring a Badinter (qualified majority) vote without DUI participation, then the proposal would meet stiff international resistance. I noted that the plan would also make it difficult for the country to progress beyond ethnically-based parties to parties based on ideological foundations. Adhering to any existing international best practice in this case would be important.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) Gruevski's lunch invitation followed several weeks of piqued silence after I delivered to him in early July a tough message about the need to speed up implementation of the May 29 agreement. At that time, I told him that failure to move ahead on the working groups on language and victims of conflict could jeopardize the success of his Foreign Minister's planned visit to Washington, a message he wrongly interpreted as an attempt at undue pressure on him personally. The fact that he took the initiative to invite me to lunch, expressed regret at his earlier over-reaction, and now sought to meet and consult on a range of NATO-related issues suggests he is ready to focus on concrete achievements that will support Macedonia's NATO candidacy.

MILOVANOVIC